Synergies

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Is it helpful to be religious? The three target articles focus on this question. The favored answer, "it depends," seems a foregone conclusion given the amorphous nature of both the "independent variable", religion (the many different brands offer contrasting behavioral and spiritual advice), and the "dependent variable", well-being (which is operationalized in a variety of ways, including ability to cope with stress, success in social relationships, physical and psychological health, and mortality), as well as the differing quality of the samples and measures.

The authors decry the lack of research on religion. What strikes us is not the dearth of relevant research—the literature reviewed in the target articles is far from negligible—but the focus on the costs and benefits of religion. Such research can help delineate which types of religious practices affect which outcomes, and all three articles take important steps in this direction. There are additional issues that could be explored profitably, however. Religion embodies the wisdom of the ages and has attracted the attention of some of the most gifted thinkers throughout history. As a result, religious texts and discussions provide a rich store of hypotheses about human behavior that that could be subjected to scientific test by research psychologists.

Our own current research interest is in people's views of themselves through time. We have developed a theory of temporal self-appraisal (Ross & Wilson, 2000; Wilson & Ross, in press) that examines how people evaluate past selves and how those evaluations affect their

current self-appraisals. We consider factors that lead people to perceive a unity with their earlier selves and those that lead people to embrace and exaggerate change.

Reading the target articles inspired an admittedly cursory look at writings and discussions on religion to see what they had to offer of relevance to our own research concerns. Not surprisingly given our interest in perceived transformation and change, we discovered a vein well worth mining. In the next few pages, we provide some examples of what we found and connect them to our own work.

People's stories of their lives are tales of continuity in the face of change. Across the lifespan, just about everything within and about us changes, including our bodies, knowledge, attitudes, family constellations, friendships, homes, and belongings. Yet we often perceive a continuous self. Many authors have argued that this perception of self-continuity is both a philosophical (e.g., Flanagan, 1996) and psychological imperative (e.g., Ball & Chandler, 1989; Chandler, in press). Philosophical discussions include intriguing analogies such as the ship of Theseus (Nozick, 1981). As the ship ages, its boards are gradually replaced until the entire vessel is rebuilt. When if ever, ask philosophers, is it a different ship? When the vessel is a person the preferred philosophical answer seems to be "never." Imagine a society in which individuals are seen as unconnected to their earlier selves. Logically, crimes would go unpunished and achievements unrewarded because there would then be no basis for holding people responsible for previous actions or commitments (Chandler, in press; Harré, 1980). Why penalize or compensate someone who is now a different person from the perpetrator?

Religious passages deal with this very issue. For example, below is a section of a text probably written in the first century BC to dispel doubts about various tenets of Buddhism. It is

written in the form of dialogue between King Milinda (the Greek King Menander) and Nagasena, a Buddhist monk.

> The king said: 'He who is born, Nagasena, does he remain the same or become another?'
> 'Neither the same nor another.'
> 'Give me an illustration.'
> 'Now what do you think, O king? You were once a baby, a tender thing, and small in size, lying flat on your back. Was that the same as you who are now grown up?'
> 'No. That child was one, I am another.'
> 'If you are not that child, it will follow that you have had neither mother nor father, no! nor teacher. You cannot have been taught either learning, or behaviour, or wisdom. What, great king! is the mother of the embryo in the second stage, or the third, or the fourth? Is the mother of the baby a different person from the mother of the grown-up man? Is the person who goes to school one, and the same when he has finished his schooling another? Is it one who commits a crime, another who is punished by having his hands and feet cut off?'
> 'Certainly not. But what would you, Sir, say to that?'
> The Elder replied: 'I should say that I am the same person, now I am grown up, as I was when I was a tender tiny baby, flat on my back. For all these states are included in one by means of this body.'
> 'Give me an illustration.'
> 'Suppose a man, O king, were to light a lamp, would it burn the night through?'
> 'Yes, it might do so.'
> 'Now, is it the same flame that burns in the first watch of the night, Sir, and in the second?'
> 'No.'
> 'Or the same that burns in the second watch and in the third?'
> 'No.'
> 'Then is there one lamp in the first watch, and another in the second, and another in the third?'
> 'No. The light comes from the same lamp all the night through.'
> 'Just so, O king, is the continuity of a person or thing maintained. One comes into being, another passes away; and the rebirth is, as it were, simultaneous. Thus neither as the same nor as another does a man go on to the last phase of his self-consciousness.'
> 'Give me a further illustration.'
> 'It is like milk, which when once taken from the cow, turns, after a lapse of time, first to curds, and then from curds to butter, and then from butter to ghee. Now would it be right to say that the milk was the same thing as the curds, or the butter, or the ghee?'
> 'Certainly not; but they are produced out of it.'
> 'Just so, O king, is the continuity of the person or thing maintained. One comes into being, another passes away; and the rebirth is, as it were, simultaneous. Thus neither as the same nor as another does a man go on to the last phase of his self-consciousness.'
> 'Well put, Nagasena!' (Davids, 1969, p.63-65)

The philosophical dilemma posed in the above passage is echoed in debates appearing in the media today. In recent years, a number of murderers who have undergone religious conversion have requested clemency on the grounds that they are now different people from the perpetrators of the crimes. For example, Karla Faye Tucker was sentenced to die after she brutally murdered two people with a pickax in Texas in 1983. After becoming a "born-again" Christian in prison, she claimed that she was a different person than the one who committed the murders. Her impending execution created an international uproar. The Pope and other notables argued for mercy because Tucker was a changed person who was no longer a menace to society. The Governor of Texas at the time, George W. Bush, and the Texas parole board rejected the appeals. Tucker was sentenced to death by lethal injection.

On January 14, 1998, just three weeks before her execution, Karla Faye appeared on Larry King Live (CNN). In the interview, she dissociated her current self from her self at the time of the murders. The interview included the following exchanges:

> KING: Do you feel you're a different person?
>
> TUCKER: Yes, I am.
>
> KING: Is that part of your argument?
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> TUCKER: That is definitely part of the argument on our writ, and part of my argument, or part of my appeal to them is that when you change from being a part of the problem to being a part of the solution, allow somebody that -- if I was in here still messing up, still hurting people or trying to kill people, I know that the parole board would strike that against me in a major way. So if there is a change for the positive, and it's proven, and it's factual, why can't that be considered?

Later in the interview Karla Faye continued to appeal for a pardon based on her transformation:

> KING: So you're asking for a commutation because "I have changed, I am not the person I was, I believe in the Lord, I am a good person, I can help people, I don't deserve to die." Is that, in essence, the summation of what you're asking the state of Texas?

> TUCKER: That's, yes, that's pretty good, to say that I am no longer a continual threat to society, which is one of the things, in order to give a death sentence,… a question has to be answered: Would this person be a continual threat to society and do bodily harm to somebody? No, I won't.

The international protest and the interview with King raise intriguing social psychological questions concerning perceptions of self-continuity, personal responsibility and justice that could be probed in experimental research. When do we see ourselves or other people as genuinely transformed? If a person is apparently transformed are we willing to accept a kind of statute of limitations such that the current individual is not held responsible for the actions of his or her earlier selves? When and why might we be unwilling to agree to such limitations? The theorizing of Dweck (1991) and Ross and Wilson (2000) is relevant to these questions, but we are aware of no psychological research that directly addresses the issues.

Researchers have examined other questions related to self-continuity. In particular, Michael Chandler and his colleagues have studied the psychological implications of denying self-continuity during adolescence (Ball & Chandler, 1989; Chandler, in press). These researchers find that a perception of self-continuity may be critical to subjective well-being. How do people manage to maintain a belief in self-continuity in the face of all of the changes that they experience? When do they prefer to emphasize change rather than continuity? These questions are under investigation in our own lab as well as by Chandler's group.

When people experience religious conversions, they regard themselves as new and improved models of their former selves. Ullman (1989) proposed that converts arrive at this conclusion, in part, by exaggerating their preconversion sinfulness: "This tendency to denounce the old life as an abomination is evident in some accounts of religious conversions in which relatively innocent transgressions of youth are elevated to the status of major crimes and deplored by a repentant convert." (p 14) Ullman used Tolstoy's autobiography to illustrate her

thesis. After experiencing a religious conversion, Tolstoy was highly critical of his youthful self. According to Ullman, Tolstoy "describes the average life of a young man of society but, in his description, the vain, purposeless aspects of this life are painted with such extremity and force as to single him and his companions out as intentional, corrupt villains." (p 178)

Ross and Conway (1986; Conway and Ross, 1984) discovered a similar type of retrospective bias while researching self-improvement programs such study skills courses. Although participants tend to regard such programs favorably, researchers suggest that the programs are generally ineffective. If the researchers are correct, why do participants see the programs as successful? Ross and Conway obtained experimental evidence that, after engaging in a self-improvement program, participants exaggerate how deficient they were before they began the program. This retrospective bias allows them to claim improvement when little or none occurs. The recall bias also provides a means of perceiving progress without unduly enhancing one's current abilities or qualities. Participants don't necessarily view themselves as terrific now, but they do see improvement. A highly unrealistic judgment of the present self could get people into trouble: they might undertake actions and responsibilities that they are poorly equipped to perform. In contrast, the past is past: There is often little harm in misconstruing how one used to be, as well as little objective evidence to discredit one's recall.

Criticism of distant past selves occurs even in the absence of religious conversions or self-improvement programs (Wilson & Ross, in press). Psychological research suggests that people are highly motivated to perceive themselves as improving on dimensions that matter to them. According to Ross and Wilson's (2000) temporal self-appraisal theory, people often derogate distant past selves in order to perceive such improvement. When an earlier self is sufficiently distant, the current self can deny responsibility for its actions and outcomes ("That

was the old me."). Consequently, criticism of a distant self tends not to taint the present self and allows individuals to perceive themselves as improving on important dimensions. Wilson & Ross (in press) document the tendency to criticize distant past selves and show that a perception of improvement can be illusory.

Following a religious conversion, people tend to dissociate themselves from their previous selves by emphasizing growth and change. Even in the absence of a formal conversion, however, people tend to separate themselves from past outcomes and actions that could have unfavorable implications for their current self-regard. Cameron, Ross and Holmes (under review) had members of dating couples report an earlier transgression that was committed by one partner against the other. Transgressors perceived themselves as having changed and improved more since the time of the transgression than did their victims (Cameron, Ross & Holmes, under review). In other research, individuals reported that their failures feel further away than do their successes, even when the actual temporal distance of the two outcomes is the same (Ross & Wilson, in preparation). By distancing failures, individuals can reduce the culpability of the present self for these negative outcomes.

In sum, the target articles have led us to recognize a possible synergy between our own work and psychological analyses offered in religious writings and discussions. From our perspective, these analyses provide potentially interesting insights into human behavior. There are a lot of testable hypotheses waiting to be discovered, as well as stirring quotes that can be used to enliven journal articles. We propose to neither extol nor debunk religion, but to use it as a valuable resource.

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